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ABSTRACT

Meant primarily as a brief synthesis for consultants and supervisors in state departments of education, this statement represents an overview of the prevailing instructional scene. It notes the current swing to the right in educational approaches, looks at the emerging trends in federal concerns, examines the current thinking concerning teaching style and cognitive style, and discusses the implications of these matters for the state department of education. Five steps are suggested as a coping strategy: rebuild morale and desire in educators, deal with public dissatisfaction issue by issue, determine curricular weak points, combine inservice and dissemination strategies, and increase the interaction between the state department of education staff and dissemination personnel. (Author/IRT)

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The following statement represents a brief overview of the prevailing instructional scene. It is meant, primarily, as a brief synthesis for consultants and supervisors in state departments of education. In the interest of comprehensiveness, the major points are set forth without elaboration. As a consequence, those interested in any deeper analysis of the issues involved may wish to probe further.

THE CURRENT SCENE IN CURRICULUM

Louis Rubin

In a time when dollar resources have become increasingly scant and, conversely, consumer expectations more and more pronounced, it is essential that state education agencies determine what kinds of curricular readjustments deserve highest priority. During the current decade, for example, we have gone from performance contracting and behavioral objectives to "minimal-competency testing" to "back-to-basics." As the demands on the schools tumble, one over another, it is difficult to remain abreast of rapid changes, and educators have become increasingly confused by the conflicting expectations of different constituencies. It therefore becomes important to separate the significant from the trivial.

In general, the current scene is characterized by extreme conservatism. Historically, a period of amity tends to follow widespread innovation, and the shift toward comparative stability is not surprising. Many of the curriculum reforms initiated in the 60's and 70's, moreover, have not yet proven to be entirely productive. As a result, we have entered a time of retrenchment wherein dramatic developments are unlikely. It is almost as if a pendulum, first swinging too far to the left, reverses

direction in order to reach a suitable balance. This same conservatism, it might be added, is equally visible in other social programs: urban reform, welfare, crime prevention, for example, have lost a good deal of their radical bent. It is to be regretted, nonetheless, that the conservatism has been attributed to a decline in public faith. In the September 1979 Phi Delta Kappan, the following commentary appeared on the editor's page: "This year, two-thirds of the American people feel that their public schools are doing an average to failing job of educating their children. What can the schools do to earn an "A" Gallup asks of his respondents. These seven things, in order of mention, the people reply: improve the quality of teachers, increase discipline, set higher standards, give more individual attention to students, put more emphasis on the basics, improve management and direction of schools, and, last, establish closer relations with parents."

It goes without saying that these seven expectations--whether rational or irrational--should receive close attention from state departments of education. Although conservatism is both cause and effect, it is folly to disregard public belief.

The recent creation of a Department of Education may also have a bearing on state responsibilities with respect to curriculum leadership. It seems reasonable to assume, in fact, that there will be some drift toward a more nationalized system of education. The 1979 ESEA legislation calls for increased federal funding of the states, but federal policies--in the form of court decisions and categorical programs--will undoubtedly impose constraints on state autonomy. Nonetheless, it is safe to predict that the role of state education agencies--in perpetuating specific instructional changes--will become larger, rather than smaller, in the immediate future.

Emerging Federal Trends

More than anything else, perhaps, the evolving events reflect a pronounced concern for school improvement and equity in educational opportunity. There are, in this connection, movements toward more direct service on the part of SEAs, as well as a growing interest in developing closer interaction among federal, state and local agencies. The envisioned collaboration has two aims: a more intelligent division of labor, and, the elimination of unnecessary replication. As efforts to restrict educational costs have grown, a considerable amount of organizational overlap has become apparent. The resulting interest in "networking," therefore, centers on arrangements through which agencies of similar intent and ambition can work in tandem, sharing resources.

The emphasis on greater cohesion is clearly reflected in Alan Ginsburg's analysis of recent federal legislation. A government official, affiliated with the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, Ginsburg flatly contends that school people must utilize their resources more efficiently. The present federal prospectus--based presumably on the belief that local educational agencies are in the best position to coordinate available resources--calls for a decreasing emphasis upon federal programs and proportionately greater stress on grass-roots improvement.

Reflecting upon the accomplishments of Title I, as a case in point, he notes that although some three billion dollars per year were appropriated for the education of disadvantaged children, during the 1960's, much of the money was not spent on those for whom it was intended. In the 1970's, however, as the intent of compensatory education became better understood by school districts, the monetary abuses diminished substantially.

The 1978 Amendments to ESEA, Ginsburg suggests, constituted an effort to provide additional remedies. The Amendments focused on the overall quality of education, the specific areas where extra resources are essential, and the integration of state and federal programs. Other changes involved:

> Rewarding states, on a matching basis, for investing new resources in Title I programs.
>
> Increasing state funds for direct technical assistance to local districts, and for developing exemplary new programs.
>
> Extending, through mandate, the direct involvement of teachers in local policy determination.
>
> Rewriting the technical language of the legislation, making it more comprehensible to non-professionals.
>
> Extending advisory services for parents, in order to facilitate their cooperation in achieving instructional objectives.
>
> Appropriating funds, under the Basic Equality Act, for the purchase of inexpensive student workbooks for home use.
>
> Identifying, through the provisions of the "School Life Plan," the special needs of all students.
>
> Evaluating student progress, every three years, through "profiles" rather than detailed reports (thus reducing paperwork).

Another federal official, Marc Tucker of the National Institute of Education, is convinced that more local autonomy will enhance pupil achievement. Although no particular program, teaching method, or organizational procedure is consistently superior to all other alternatives, says Tucker, the flexibility to accommodate a school's special requirements is a distinct advantage.

Tucker argues that the continual exchange of ideas between professionals and citizens groups--over a sustained period of time--is an indispensible element in successful school improvement. Local administrators,

in instituting planned changes, must be free from excessive bureaucratic intervention and have strong community endorsement. The yielding of old ways for new is never easy; hence, if the attendant stresses and tensions are to be survived, those affected by the shifts must have a strong belief in their merits.

Reviewing other trends in the offing, Tucker cites four premises which underscore federal policy:

> Large educational systems are less likely to be innovative than small ones; the more cumbersome the bureaucracy, the more difficult it is to initiate improvement.
>
> The school principal is the central factor in achieving an effective educational organization.
>
> In general, mandated educational innovations produce only limited gains.
>
> Local improvement programs, designed to overcome specific problems, are more succesful than those designed to secure federal funds.

Teaching and Learning in Perspective

In view of the credibility gap now confronting the schools, it would seem that substantial emphasis should be placed upon regaining public confidence. To accomplish this end, however, it will be necessary to establish policies regarding competency standards and test scores. In this regard, several conclusions seem incontrovertible:

> Some sort of criteria for determining minimally acceptable student achievement should be established.
>
> Systematic testing programs--verifying continual progress--should be initiated.
>
> Where progress is inadequate, remedial instruction should be introduced--on a sustained basis--so that the student receives every possible assistance in attaining satisfactory levels of achievement.

4. Adequate instructional time should also be reserved, however, for important educational aims which do not lend themselves to minimal-competency testing.

State education agencies, moreover, would be well-advised to review the recent research on teaching and learning, recommend desirable approaches to instruction, and facilitate school compliance with these recommendations. Among other things, for example, student achievement is enhanced when:

> Sufficient classroom time is spent on specific competency objectives.
>
> The prerequisite skills and understandings--essential to accomplishing the learning objectives--are assured.
>
> Routine evaluation is employed in order to determine success rate and plan necessary remediation.
>
> Classrooms are organized so that the time devoted to non-instructional affairs is minimized.

There may be a tendency to assume that particular instructional strategies are, in all instances, better than others. This, unfortunately, is not the case. While, to be sure, some methods are effective and others are not, everything depends (within the range of acceptable techniques) on the specific situation. Not only are teachers particularly adept at some procedures, but learners, too, seem to be more responsive to one teaching tactic than another. As a consequence, once a repertory of respectable methodologies has been identified, considerable allowance should be made for adaptation to individual circumstance.

In most instances, instructional strategies are not good and bad in the absolute; rather, they are effective or ineffective in a given circumstance. Different subjects, for example, often demand different techniques; a teacher's "style" tends to produce optimum outcomes when congruent teaching devices which "fit" are used; students--because of

their individual learning idiosyncrasies--often learn best through a particular method; and the classroom environment itself frequently requires a specific pedagogical maneuver.

This is not to say, obviously, that the fundamental principles of teaching and learning can be violated with impunity. Medley's investigations, as a case in point, demonstrate that highly successful teachers--irrespective of what teaching methods they use--are likely to respect certain essential pre-conditions. They engineer classrooms which are organized, orderly and precise. They are adept at using time to maximum advantage and at sustaining pupil involvement. Even when their students are busy with assigned seat-work, they pay exceedingly close attention to what goes on. Another researcher, Jacob Kounin, makes the same point when he observes that effective teachers are "with-it" rather than "out-of-it;" that is, they seem to have an almost intuitive sense of the classroom mood which prevails.

Skilful practitioners also are marked by their ability to use different tactics, with different students, in different contexts. In so doing, they substantially increase the probability of higher student achievement. The research on attribution theory is especially relevant in this regard. Although the concept of personal causation (individual responsibility for learning) is hardly new, it recently has taken on renewed importance. The studies of de Charms (1972) provide a useful illustration: through student training programs, he sought to convince learners that their behavior--and their learning success--was chiefly determined by their own actions rather than by some outside force. Positive results were obtained, particularly in arithmetic and language skills. His conclusions suggest, among other things, that it is a grave mistake to restrict

accountability to teachers alone: students, too, must assume at least some responsibility for their learning achievement.

There is, in this same connection, a renaissance of interest in the value of hard work. When, in short, students attribute learning failure to some external factor, they are not likely to expend much effort and, as a result, further failure is probable. But when, in contrast, they view poor performance as the inevitable consequence of insufficient endeavor, the will to invest greater personal energy in learning is increased.

Implications for State Education Agencies

Among other unfinished business, there is also the conspicuous problem of connection. While, to be sure, the linkage between pre-service and inservice training has been subjected to a considerable amount of debate, the relationship between inservice development and new reform programs is a good deal looser. It may, perhaps, be too early--in the reconstitution of inservice's image--to expect more than has occurred, but, sooner or later, the need to place the continuous professional growth of educational personnel into the general framework of overall school improvement will become indispensable.

One obvious example of needless fragmentation can be found in the isolation which exists between staff development and dissemination. Surveying the present scene, it is apparent that a) virtually every state is heavily involved in dissemination and diffusion, b) all states are increasingly concerned about bettering inservice provisions, c) considerable funds, local, state and federal, are being spent on both kinds of pursuits, and d) in most instances a significant effort to exploit the common ground they share and to fuse the resources of each, has not taken place.

Consider, as an illustration, the primary objectives of dissemination and professional development. Diffusion (the systematic introduction of new practices) and dissemination (the prerequisite communication that produces an awareness of such practices) are fundamentally intended to promote healthy innovation and change. These terms were heavily ingrained in the rhetoric of the sixties, and although they have now been replaced with different labels such as "school improvement" and "school reform," the basic aspirations are essentially the same. Inservice too, obviously, is, at bottom, directed toward generating better practice. Both sets of endeavors, therefore, have similar goals.

The lessons of the last decade have made it clear that there is a strong bond between better instruction and greater practitioner sophistication. It might be argued, in fact, that dissemination and diffusion, particularly when they deal with specific programs and products, are largely useless if they are not tied to systematic inservice. In point of fact, when dissemination and diffusion focus upon specific methods and practices, they <u>are</u> inservice. It seems surprising, therefore, that a logical marriage of convenience between the two has not, in any real way, been consummated.

Present federal trends indicate that the hallmark of the immediate future is to be found in school-based reform. More funds, as noted earlier, will be funneled through the states for providing aid to local units. In addition, the growing skepticism as to the virtues of federally planned programs, coupled with tighter compliance regulations, have led to more and more interest in reform and improvement emanating, not from the banks of the Potomac or the State House, but from the grass roots. Hence, although increased decentralization and local autonomy are in the offing, state

departments will continue to exercise considerable influence--as evaluators and monitors of local programs. The importance of internal cohesion within state agencies is therefore made even greater.

The current sense of disheartenment and depression afflicting the profession, creates--albeit indirectly--another common problem. Neither inservice nor dissemination can achieve their respective purposes without some effort to counteract the mood of gloom, malaise and despair that has developed. School closings, the elimination of teaching and administrative positions, an exaggerated emphasis upon test scores, and a negative press do not breed an inspiring environment, or much incentive, for strong practitioner commitment. But without such commitment, the successful introduction of new programs and the upgrading of professional practice are seriously impeded. How can a denigrated and maligned profession be exhorted to do better? It is precisely this dilemma which state agencies now confront. What, then, can be suggested in the way of coping strategies?

Five Steps

The vital first step, clearly, is to rebuild morale and reinvigorate desire. There are no patron saints or helping angels at large, and the task will fall largely upon the educational leadership itself. state departments of education, self-evidently, must play a prominent role in this regard.

It would be foolhardy, however, to treat symptoms and ignore causes. An essential second step, consequently, is to deal with public dissatisfaction, whether rational or irrational, issue by issue. At least part of the dissemination and inservice movements' energies must be directed toward realignments which help dispell the waves of criticism.

Good sometimes arises out of evil, and the challenge is not entirely without redemption. With a bit of prudence and shrewdness, it may be possible to convert public concerns into respectable dissemination and inservice goals which not only help to relieve the presumed consumer dissatisfaction, but which also advance the cause of staff development and instructional improvement.

Other elements, however, have some legitimacy and should therefore be treated as reform objectives. Thus, a third step would involve determining curricular weak-points, particularly those which worry parents, and initiating correctives. There does not seem to be any reason, for example, why a part of staff development and dissemination activity cannot be directed toward particular problems which are repeatedly alluded to in the popular media. Furthermore, appropriate program revision--widely publicized--is perhaps the only effective way of dealing with public negativism.

A potential fourth step has to do with the deliberate amalgamation of inservice and dissemination strategies. Since the two have a mutual nexus, and an awareness of useful new practices is basic to sound staff development, both can be attacked in concert. A considerable amount of organizational change and staff development, for example, currently is aimed at new programs for the educationally handicapped, competency based education, and the assessment of learner achievement; little is going on, nevertheless, in the way of complementary dissemination endeavor.

And, as a fifth step, much might be gained if state departments of education would seek to increase the interaction between their staff development and dissemination personnel. A single school may, in the course of a year, work with as many as seven or eight different divisions of its

state agency. The convergence and continuity between the delivery of these services, in most instances, is happenstance. Such fragmentation, it goes without saying, is regrettable; one would think that, at least some of the time, far better collaboration would be possible.